The Retrograde

Tuesday, January 20, 2026

UTD's official, independently-run student newspaper.

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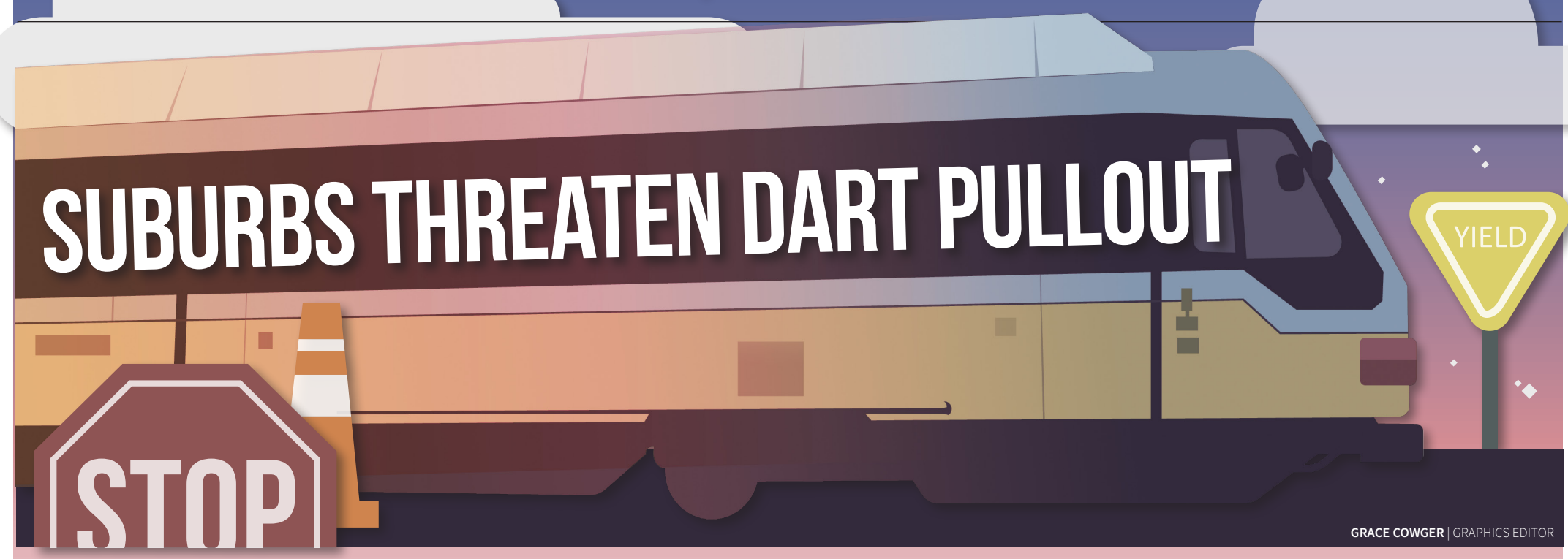


GRACE COWGER | GRAPHICS EDITOR

SUBURBS THREATEN DART PULLOUT

Voters across parts of the metroplex will decide whether to withdraw in May 2026, slashing transit funding for the network

TYLER CRIVELLA
Assistant Managing Editor

This story was originally published online on Nov. 17.

City councils in Plano, Irving, Farmers Branch and Highland Park each passed a ballot initiative that will now ask their voters to decide whether to remain in the Dallas Area Rapid Transit system on May 2, 2026.

Were a partner city to withdraw, it would no longer fund DART, likely leading to fewer available public transit routes or decreased frequencies across the entire DART system. However, it is currently unclear whether a withdrawn partner city would stop being serviced by DART entirely. Partner cities such as Plano and Irving are located at crucial connections within the DART system, which could complicate ridership even for those outside withdrawn neighborhoods. Benjamin Goodine, Comets for Better Transit president and accounting junior, said he is concerned that students will be some of the most negatively impacted by the change.

"Students that rely on DART will be hurt," Goodine said. "It's a public good. Highways don't make any money but that same kind of thinking never gets applied to public transit networks."

UTD students disproportionately utilize the DART system relative to other metroplex residents. The 883 UTD Shuttle route has the highest bus ridership in the DART service region, with an average 41 riders per hour on weekdays.

> "It's far from perfect. But if you're going to complain about safety, taking away funds won't help."
>
> **— Benjamin Goodine**

Calls to withdraw began out of financial concerns from relatively wealthier cities, with supporters of withdrawal citing funding inequities between different DART partner cities. Plano City Councilman for Place 5 Steve Lavine said that transit alternatives might provide citizens options that are lower or at the same price as DART's services.

"Voters deserve a choice because DART is not the only option," Lavine said. "I feel strongly that any transportation solution should include a simple way for students at UTD to get to where they need in Plano. We'd like to find solutions that make transit as simple as possible."

Plano's former DART director Paul Wageman has expressed interest in Plano defunding DART to focus on "micro-transit" like increased GoLink, which is described as "Uber-like" government-funded transport by City of Plano representatives. The effectiveness of these programs, however, has been questioned by students like Goodine.

"It's called 'public transit' for a reason," Goodine said. "No one calls it 'minivan transit' because that's super ineffective. And what happens if Plano has a big concert or something? Only a separate transport network like light rail can alleviate stress from increased transport demand."

DART CEO Nadine Lee said the withdrawal would likely make students' commutes worse. Seventy-eight percent of students at UTD already live off campus, and funding cuts after a successful withdrawal could severely impact campus travel time.

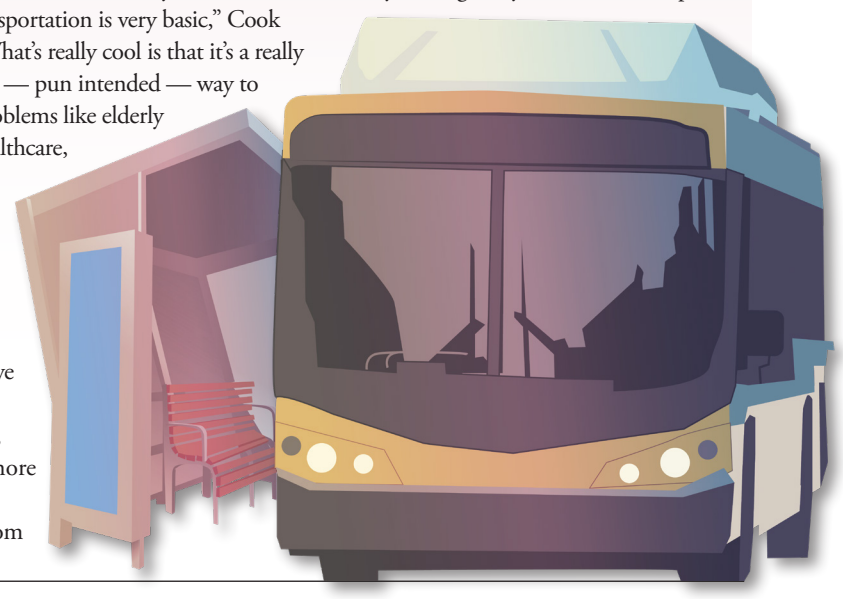
"When I think about congestion, citizens pay in time or money," Lee said. "When you decide to not fund public transit, you're signing up to sit in delays and congestion. Every partner city wants something different, but everyone agrees we all need more funding."

As the metroplex's population grows, public transit has become a larger focus of government discussions. Texas Sen. Molly Cook said public transportation is a base factor in almost every way of life for voters and expressed concern at Texans' increased hostility to it.

"Transportation is very basic," Cook said. "What's really cool is that it's a really concrete — pun intended — way to solve problems like elderly care, healthcare, etc. We have an aging population and if they don't have a chance to move, they're more likely to suffer from dementia. It's more than just a train. It's part of the fabric of communities."

Comets for Better Transit plans to continue the fight for public transit options and mobilize voters in May 2026. After students attended the newly opened Silver Line's debut, some, like computer science junior Colin Wong, chose to speak at city council meetings in support of DART. Its continued existence, to supporters, depends on its continued funding.

"It's far from perfect," Goodine said. "But if you're going to complain about safety, taking away funds won't help."



RAINIER PEDERSON | RETROGRADE STAFF

Budget cuts delay survivor advocate position despite student push

A year after a unanimous Student Government resolution, UTD continues to lack a support service of peer institutions

GREGORIO OLIVARES GUTIERREZ
Editor-in-Chief

In November 2024, Student Government passed a resolution calling for the creation of a dedicated "survivor advocate" position to support students reporting sexual assault, stalking and harassment. Over a year later, Vice President of Student Affairs Gene Fitch told student leaders over email that the position remains on hold because of university-wide budget reductions.

The delay highlights a long-standing disconnect between students advocating for trauma-informed support and administration providing that support, even as the university invests in other high-profile campus initiatives. Students supporting the advocate position's creation argued it was a crucial, missing piece of campus safety infrastructure.

"There's no excuse for our university to be lagging behind so far," Nandita Kumar, senior public policy major and the resolution's author, said. "Other universities have been so far ahead of us for so many years."

The case for an advocate: "The process is so confusing"

The push for a survivor advocate, Kumar said, was born from a clear need students had identified. While counseling services exist, students reported a lack of impartial, trauma-informed guidance through the complex procedure of reporting an assault.

"Students need support that isn't just counseling, but someone who can provide them knowledge of the resources and options they have," Kumar said. "The process is so confusing at every step."

Kumar described the labyrinth students can face when navigating the differences between a Title IX report and a police report, understanding how to request emergency housing accommodations or accessing a forensic medical exam.

"Most students get re-traumatized and re-victimized through that process," Kumar said.

Read the rest of this story by visiting retrogradenews.com.

HackUTD marks ten years of hackathons with fantasy and fire alarms

How organizers, judges and attendees came together in a temporary city sprawling over south campus

GREGORIO OLIVARES GUTIERREZ
Editor-in-Chief

This story was originally published online on Nov. 17.

For 24 hours starting Nov. 8, UTD's engineering buildings transformed into a storybook wonderland for North America's largest 24-hour hackathon, a title HackUTD now holds for the second year in a row. That weekend, it became a temporary city for 1,204 participants, opening the doors to two worlds operating in tandem: an immersive dream world made for participants, with tens of thousands of dollars' worth of prizes at stake, and the frenetic, student-led plan that allows this logistical feat to happen annually since 2015.

I spent the weekend passing through both worlds.

The participants' journey began at 8 a.m. as hundreds of students waited to check-in and begin exploring the interactive narrative of this year's hackathon. This year's theme, "lost in the pages," was a full story arc. Hackers weren't just attendees; they were characters in a live tale that opened with a hand-drawn animated quest and closed with a skit resolving the plot.

"They made it a very immersive theme," computer science junior and participant Swarna Sre Ganesh said. "From the moment I checked in, I was already surrounded by the many decorations and cute characters."

The students I spoke to each came to the hackathon for their own reasons. The vast majority wanted to network with sponsors for the chance at a job after graduation, others were here to win the eye-catching prizes and some attended for the "vibes" and the famously free and high-quality merch. "CS students want to actually do something for once at HackUTD," Ganesh said. "The hackathon makes you get things done."

SEE HACK, PAGE 2

GREGORIO OLIVARES GUTIERREZ | RETROGRADE STAFF

HackUTD sign with forest decorations and spotlights in the ATEC auditorium before the opening ceremony as students return after a fire alarm scare.

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Emails reveal pressures leading UTD to remove beloved Spirit Rocks

Records reveal Hillel and Chabad leaders prompted administration action after "Zionism = Nazism" message, despite initial assessment that speech was protected

GREGORIO OLIVARES GUTIERREZ
Editor-in-Chief

UTD flipped from supporting student expression on the Spirit Rocks to abruptly removing them from campus six weeks later because of pressure from off-campus groups and influential alumni, internal university emails obtained by *The Retrograde show.*

The Spirit Rocks had been a popular forum for students to express themselves using paint since 2008. In fall 2023, student journalists at *The Mercury* reported on the sudden removal of the rocks during break. The removal came after a heated paint war took over the rocks, centering on political discourse following the outbreak of conflict in Gaza earlier that fall. At the time, UTD administration cited "extended political discourse that had negatively affected people on and off campus" as the rationale behind the removal.

The 124 pages of correspondence obtained through a public records request reveal a glimpse into how the university's commitment to free speech buckled under coordinated pressure, shifting from a defense of protected expression to a quiet removal.

"Protected speech" meets pressure

The paper trail began in mid-October 2023, as the rocks became a daily canvas for dueling Israeli and Palestinian flags, and eventually, the phrase "Zionism = Nazism."

A Jewish student whose name was redacted by UTD quickly emailed Dean of Students Amanda Smith. "This is not okay," they wrote Oct. 14, attaching a nighttime photo of the rocks. The redacted student followed up Oct. 15: "the words written now are fully antisemitic."

Smith responded to the student Oct. 17 with her definitive internal assessment. "While I understand various statements can be hurtful, nothing has been identified that is not protected under the First Amendment or is in violation of UTDSP5001," she wrote.

UTDSP5001 functions as UTD's speech, expression and assembly policy. Political, philosophical and academic arguments are specifically protected under this policy, as well as the First Amendment. That legal baseline quickly eroded.

Two hours after Smith sent her response, it was no longer a student reaching out. At 9:47 a.m, Melissa Duchin Friedensohn, the executive director of Hillel of North Texas, emailed then-UTD President Richard Benson to outline the concerns she had heard from students who felt "anxious, scared and targeted" on social media and because of the rocks.

Benson forwarded the email to over half his executive cabinet within minutes of receiving it. By 9:56 p.m., Kimberly Goodfriend, Executive Associate to the President, said she had "received a phone call this morning from a student about the Spirit Rocks" and that an email from the student was expected soon.

At this point, the machinery of administrative attention was not fully engaged.

Escalating higher

Alongside Hillel's October outreach, a more pointed grievance arrived from a donor. A self-described current student, 2019 alumni and donor wrote to Benson Oct. 17, directly linking the rocks to a climate of fear. The alumnus, whose name was redacted by UTD, attached a photo of the rocks with the phrases "Zionism = Nazism" and "Terrorists."

"I have chosen to not attend class because I'm worried for my safety," the alumnus said. "Accepting this type of communication without any action makes me sick to my stomach. This is no longer free speech and I am ashamed to be a part of an institution that lets this happen on their watch and has not taken any actions to ensure the safety of their students."

RETROGRADE ARCHIVE PHOTO

The Spirit Rocks painted with the phrase "Zionism = Nazism," reported to the Dean of Students Office on Oct. 14, 2023

The complaint did not stay in Richardson for long. On Oct. 19, the alumnus escalated their complaint to the UT System Board of Regents. On Oct. 21, Lauren Bellomy, Senior Associate General Counsel to the Board, replied to the alumnus that "[the] UT System has been in communication with UT Dallas and has been advised that the rocks are being monitored."

The issue was now on the radar of the university's central system office.

The pivot from speech to safety

As external pressure mounted, an internal crisis provided a new rationale for action. In early November, administrators were alerted to a student veteran with PTSD who had become "triggered by the war in Gaza."

"Images on the Spirit Rocks have been triggering him," Smith wrote in a BAIT report sent to Gene Fitch, vice president of Student Affairs, on Nov. 2. BAIT reports, part of UTD's Behavior Assessment and Intervention program, deal with "at-risk" students and help coordinate a university response to support them. Fitch shared the report with Benson and Chief of Staff Rafael Martin. Fitch noted it was unusual for him to share so many details about a student in crisis with other university executives, but that this was "an escalating situation."

If the rocks constituted a serious campus safety emergency to administrators during this time, it was not stated in any emails *The Retrograde* reviewed. No other disapproval toward the rocks was found in the obtained emails.

The removal and reaction

The rocks were removed early in the morning Nov. 20, the first day of fall break. The public announcement later that day from Student Affairs cited "extended political discourse."

In the following days, the university did not respond to criticism -

Read the rest of this story at retrogradenews.com.

UTD takes gold in synthetic biology contest

Despite being their first year in the field, an undergraduate team won big at a competitive international competition

TYLER CRIVELLA
Assistant Managing Editor

A team of five UTD students finished a 10-month biomanufacturing research process, placing first among more than 5,000 participants from over 65 countries in the International Genetically Engineered Machine competition.

UTD team taRNAdigrada's project revolved around the protection of mRNA vaccine proteins, such as the ones rapidly developed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. To protect the fragile protein structures, the team turned to a small yet extremely resilient micro-animal: the tardigrade. Given the extreme inequities in vaccine distribution, partially due to difficult temperature conditions abroad, there exists great need for protein structures resilient like the tardigrade to be integrated into mRNA protein production.

"Vaccines [could] be stored at different temperature conditions and their longevity [could] be extended," biomedical engineering junior Namyuktha Prakash said. "It [could] expand access to vaccines!"

The team consisted of five members: Prakash, neuroscience and business administration senior Amanda Le, biochemistry junior Selina Wang, biochemistry senior Maria Shaikh and healthcare studies senior Aaliyah Sherfuddin. Despite their hard work throughout the year, the crew was initially taken aback by their success.

HANNAH LYONS | COURTESY

Below assistant professors Dave Dingal and Xintong Dong, biomedical engineering junior Namyuktha Prakash, neuroscience and business administration senior Amanda Le, biochemistry junior Selina Wang, healthcare studies senior Aaliyah Sherfuddin and biochemistry senior Maria Shaikh sit after their win in Paris.

"I think we were really surprised because we weren't necessarily expecting that," Wang said. "But it was really exciting for us to win — it was very suspenseful. It really couldn't have happened without the help of everyone involved in the project."

As part of the contest, the team traveled to Paris to present their research. The international forum, referred to as the Grand Jamboree — a weeklong exchange featuring expert speakers and impromptu conversations on biomanufacturing and in-depth learning sciences Dave Dingal said the team still had a long way to go with the project. A work investment Dingal and the students said was worthwhile since their mRNA research could prove useful in various scientific applications once a final product is ready.

"We hope that we can actually produce a scientific manuscript out of it," Dingal said. "We hope that in subsequent year we can continue to perform given we already have this experience — we learned quite a lot on a very steep learning curve."

Though three members of the team are graduating seniors, the future of the team carries much hope, especially considering the rapid advancement of the team in its first year. To fill the vacant spots, the team's advisors have put out a call for applications across the university.

"To all the first year biomedical sciences students, I want to urge you to apply," assistant bioengineering professor Xintong Dong said. "I think the team's definitely going to keep going."

Students interested should apply by Jan. 23, with freshman, sophomore and juniors of any major eligible. Questions may be directed to Dong and Dingal through their UTD emails.

HACK
CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

Watching over the whole student sandbox were the sponsors — from PNC Bank to NVIDIA and T-Mobile — who make the prizes, endless energy drinks and merch possible. The opening keynotes mixed mentorship and advice with recruitment.

"You are only constrained by your imagination," PNC Bank retail architecture and innovation head Geeta Mahesh said. "During this weekend you will help define new frontiers of the AI revolution."

For these companies, HackUTD is a high-stakes talent lab where winners and innovative projects are up for grabs.

"Students solve problems in really unique ways," NVIDIA data scientist Shashank Verma said. "They have not been institutionalized by the enterprise yet. I love seeing what everyone comes up with at hackathons."

The dream world did not build itself, even if it seemingly appeared overnight. Its architects are co-directors Adelaide Dunning, an education senior, and Kelly Zhou, a computer science senior, as well as their team of 37 volunteer officers. Their work is a year-round cycle of planning that starts "as soon as the last Hackathon ends," Zhou said.

The team manages everything from HackUTD's judging tech — which was hacked last year, now secured — to the ratio of halal and vegan meals. Their philosophy is focused on cooperation.

"We hate lecture-style meetings," Dunning said. "We always aim for open discussion and try to go out on group outings when we can."

They also focus on being friends (or at the minimum friendly) first and officers second. Experience officer and master of ceremonies Reiki Hingorani said that HackUTD and its officer team were incredibly welcoming.

"Apply, take the risk," Hingorani said. "We're here for everyone."

The scale they manage is staggering. The team put the budget, funded almost entirely by sponsors, toward a pop-up "tavern" that served mocktails by afternoon and ramen at midnight. They organized crates of donations, with Monster Energy alone donating over 2,300 energy drinks for the weekend — less than 100 were left by the end. Their success is measured in how invisible they can be and whether they can make this 24-hour competition feel seamless for the thousand-plus participants and dozens of volunteer judges and sponsors.

"It's challenging to find the balance between giving our all to the hackers and prioritizing ourselves," Hingorani said, voicing the quiet strain felt by all the organizers as they dealt with the fires, literal and metaphorical, that kept popping up. Dunning said that this year, the team's biggest challenge was the fire alarm during the opening ceremony.

As students prepared to begin their 24-hour rush, a fire alarm in the ATEC building led to an hour-long delay for the entire event and last-minute rescheduling to keep everything, including meals, on time.

Read the rest of this story at retrogradenews.com.

Falling international enrollment behind recent budget cuts, SG report finds

Decreased international student enrollment is directly linked to university-wide budget cuts and an ongoing operating deficit

GREGORIO OLIVARES GUTIERREZ
Editor-in-Chief

A comprehensive budget report from UTD's Student Government directly links nationwide declines in international graduate students to the 5.3% budget cuts that swept campus this year and claimed sports teams and vacant job posts.

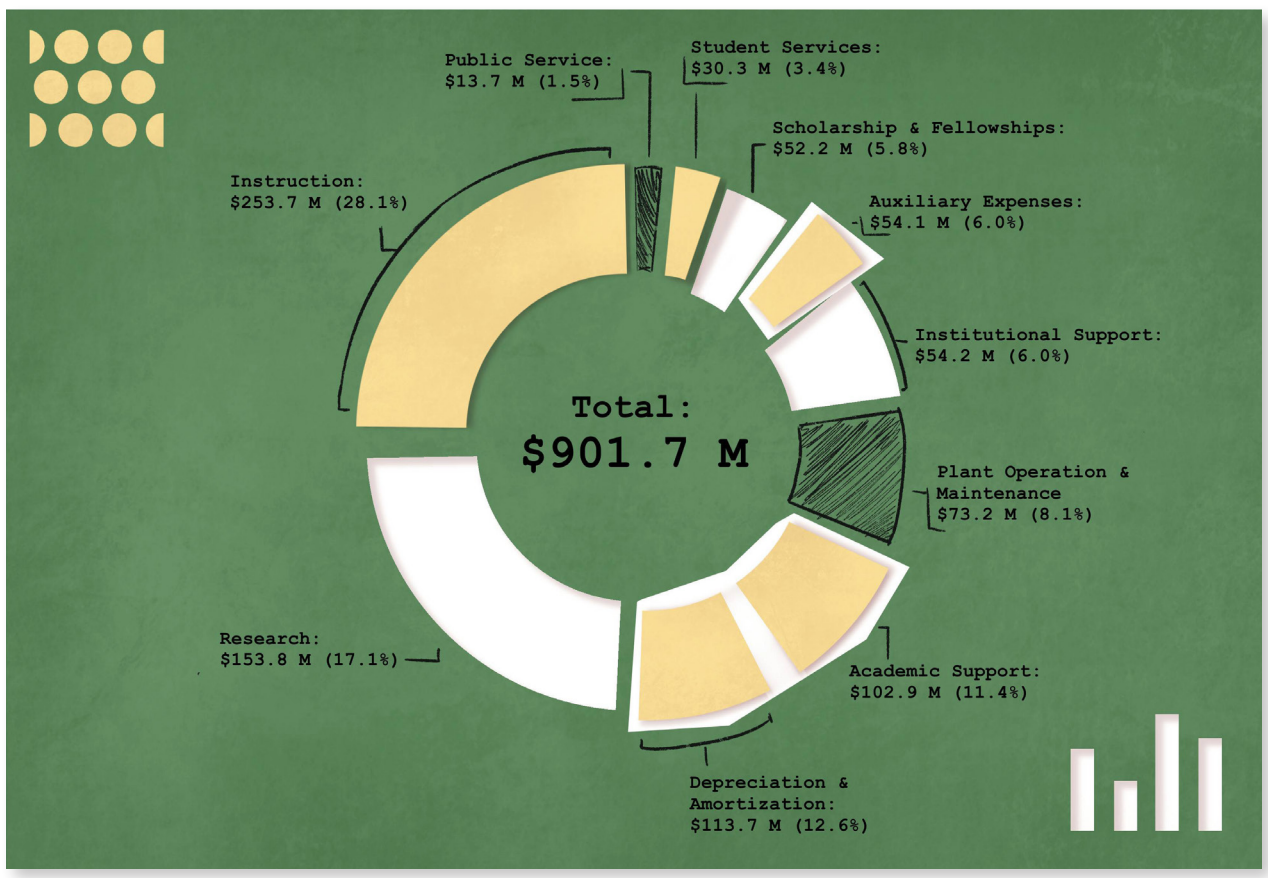
The "Budget Breakdown" report, finalized this month, is the product of a student taskforce that obtained data and context directly from the Office of Budget and Finance. It confirms that the primary driver of the fiscal crisis was a "lower than expected international graduate student enrollment," a trend exacerbated by "recent hostility towards, and uncertainty surrounding, their continued education in the United States."

For a university where international students make up a significant portion of the student body, this shortfall created a multimillion-dollar hole. A mandated 5.3% cut to all academic and administrative units during the 2025-2026 academic year was the result.

According to the university's budget office, its financial strategy believes the post-pandemic spike in enrollment is temporary. As enrollment numbers normalize, impacts on revenue are expected.

"Cash reserves were positioned to help bridge that transition," Orkun Toros, vice president for budget and finance, told *The Retrograde*.

To meet the 5.3% reduction target, deans and vice presidents were given flexibility to propose unit-level plans unique to each department. Toros said that each unit was asked to start slashing costs by first focusing on non-personnel savings, timing adjustments and vacant positions, while limiting the impacts to filled positions and active programs unless there was a clear need "with an emphasis on protecting academic delivery and student services."



ALEXA LEE | RETROGRADE STAFF

The visible wounds from budget slashes

The report details how deans and vice presidents chose to meet their new targets. The most public cost-cutting measure was the elimination of UTD's track and field and cross country programs last fall. Less visible was the deactivation of roughly 90 vacant job openings across campus.

Future growth has also been curtailed. Major construction projects not yet underway — including Athenaeum Phase 3 and a new campus power plant deemed essential for expansion — are delayed until further notice. A separate proposed housing facility north of Vega Hall was shelved entirely after revised cost estimates came in millions over budget. Toros said these projects will move forward if sustainable funding sources are acquired.

Despite these cuts, the university is still operating at a deficit, expecting shortfalls for the current and next fiscal years. The report said that to bridge the gap, administrators plan to use a portion of the university's substantial cash reserves.

"The Office of Budget and Finance … does not want to implement additional cuts that would be disruptive to the university environment," the report states. "They hope to maintain a balance of austerity in order to allow the school to operate with a sense of normalcy."

Toros defined "disruptive" reductions as those that immediately reduce course availability or required student services, delay student progress, degrade academic support or create compliance or safety risks. He emphasized that using the cash reserves is evaluated against long-term sustainability, and that if drawing cash "[weakens UTD's] financial resiliency," different, longer-term solutions will be explored.

As of fall 2025, that emergency reserve fund holds approximately 14 months of operating cash, exceeding the university's own target of having 10-12 months of operating costs in its reserve.

Auxiliary funding: housing, parking, UREC

The report also breaks down the finances of major auxiliary services like University Housing and University Recreation that are expected to largely pay for themselves. The analysis reveals a stark imbalance:

- University Housing is a major profit center, generating $46.4 million in revenue against $17 million in expenses. After debt and other charges, it presents a $12.7 million surplus.
- Parking & Transportation operates at a smaller $964,000 surplus.
- UREC, however, runs a deep $4.94 million deficit. With only $100,000 in generated income against $2.57 million in expenses, it requires a significant subsidy, which is ultimately drawn from other university revenue sources including tuition and state funds.

When asked about the long-term plan for UREC's finances, Toros challenged the report's characterization of a "deficit," noting that "UREC's budget is reviewed and approved through the Student Fee Advisory Committee and has historically remained within its approved expense budget." The UREC budget is a combination of funding pulled from student fees and income from the services UREC provides.

Where student fees go

The taskforce also dissected the mandatory fees attached to every student's tuition bill, which total $118.4 million for this academic year.

The largest single mandatory fee is the Green Fee, which accounts for $29.9 million, or 25.3% of all mandatory fee revenue. It is followed by the $15.3 million Advising Fee and the $14.7 million Infrastructure Fee. Other large fee categories include the Student Services Fee and the Student Union Fee. Student Government Vice President David Baker said that Student Affairs staff flagged the Green Fee figure for them since it exceeded the tens of thousands the fee was expected to raise by multiple orders of magnitude. The $5 fee currently only applies to freshmen and upperclassman with a variable tuition plan. Baker said SG is working with Toros to understand this figure.

Read the rest of this story by visiting retrogradenews.com.

Dallasites protest Renee Good's murder

Less than 24 hours after Good's death, local civilians marched outside Dallas' City Hall in show of opposition to ICE policy

TYLER CRIVELLA
Assistant Managing Editor

On Thursday, Jan. 8, approximately 1,000 Dallas residents protested the continued deployment of immigration enforcement officers in American cities.

The protest was largely motivated by the recent killing of Minneapolis resident Renee Good, whose death on Jan. 7 sparked protests nationwide. Though the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, or ICE, has faced opposition for at least a decade, the agency has recently faced its strongest disapproval rating ever, with polling company Civiqs noting a disapproval rate of 49%.

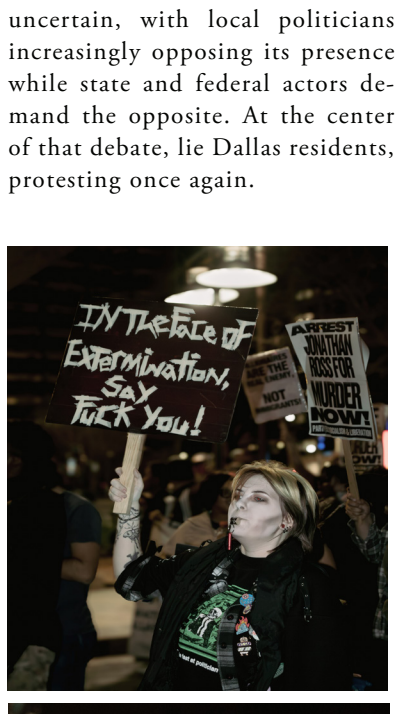
Downtown Dallas' protests were not the only show of opposition in the metroplex. On Saturday, Jan. 17, individuals gathered in Plano on the corner of Preston and Parker Roads. On Tuesday, Jan. 20, another protest is scheduled in downtown Dallas.

Local politicians have been against ICE's involvement in Dallas, even before the recent wave of protests. Last fall, ICE repeatedly proposed a $25 million collaboration with local law enforcement under its 287(g) program. Both Dallas Police Chief Daniel Comeaux and the Dallas City Council rejected the proposal, decisions Mayor Eric Johnson supported.

ICE's involvement in Dallas has itself been controversial in the last year. Following ICE's Dallas Field Office holding over 600 individuals over its 12-hour hold limit in inhumane conditions, Congresspeople Marc Veasey, Jasmine Crockett and Julie Johnson sent a letter to Secretary of Homeland Security Kristi Noem asking for increased oversight.

On Sept. 24, a 24-year old man shot into the Dallas ICE facility and then at himself, killing detainee Norlan Guzman-Fuentes. The crisis resulted in federal response and local mourning.

ICE's future in Dallas remains uncertain, with local politicians increasingly opposing its presence while state and federal actors demand the opposite. At the center of that debate, lie Dallas residents, protesting once again.



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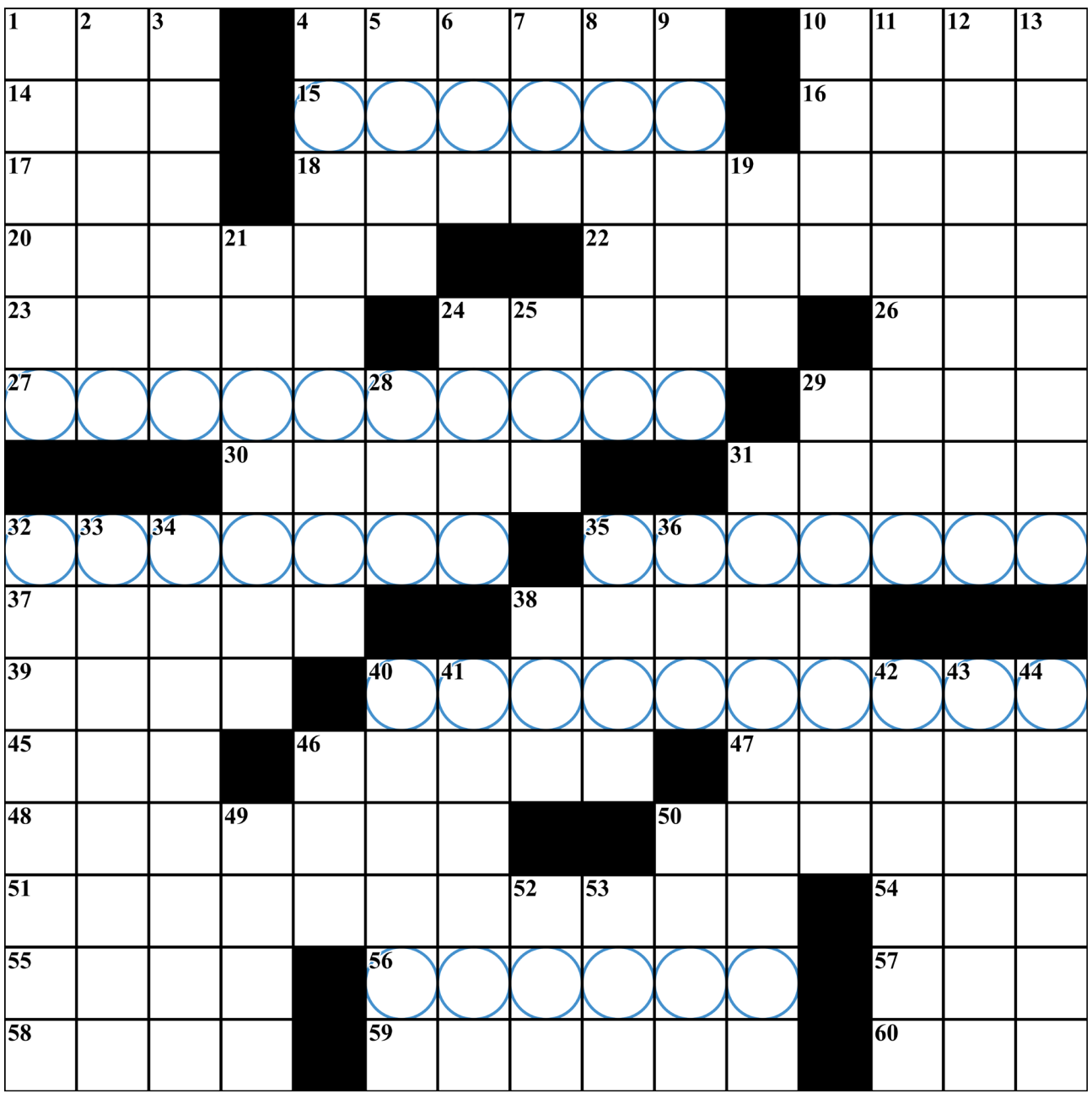

TYLER CRIVELLA | RETROGRADE STAFF

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4 Leftover preservative sheet
5 "You know how ___"
6 Dress fancily, with "out"
7 Filler word
8 Like some olives
9 Treats with disdain
10 Hisses for silence
11 Price per single unit
12 Fictional criminal mastermind
13 Wild blue mistflower
19 Minor complaint
21 Accounts ___
24 Taskmaster's Davies
25 CNN offshoot
28 Have the title to
29 Canada's northernmost territory
31 Hand moving at leaving tides?
32 Smudged, of paint
33 Entrapped
34 Obtainable
35 Four: prefix
36 Final: prefix.
38 1051, to Caesar
40 Soprano Tebaldi
41 Eras
42 American Zoologist journal and its publisher: Abbr.
43 Delta-9, e.g.
44 Fancy boats
46 Bath site
49 Fort ___, Virginia
50 Ethiopian coin
52 "___-plop!"
53 Endless road?

Need a hint?

Clues that end with "?" contain some form of wordplay or riddle. Clues that end with "Abbr." are an abbreviation or acronym. Grid spaces with a circle are theme words that tie into the puzzle's title, with the last theme word "revealing" the premise of the theme. Here, they're related to science!

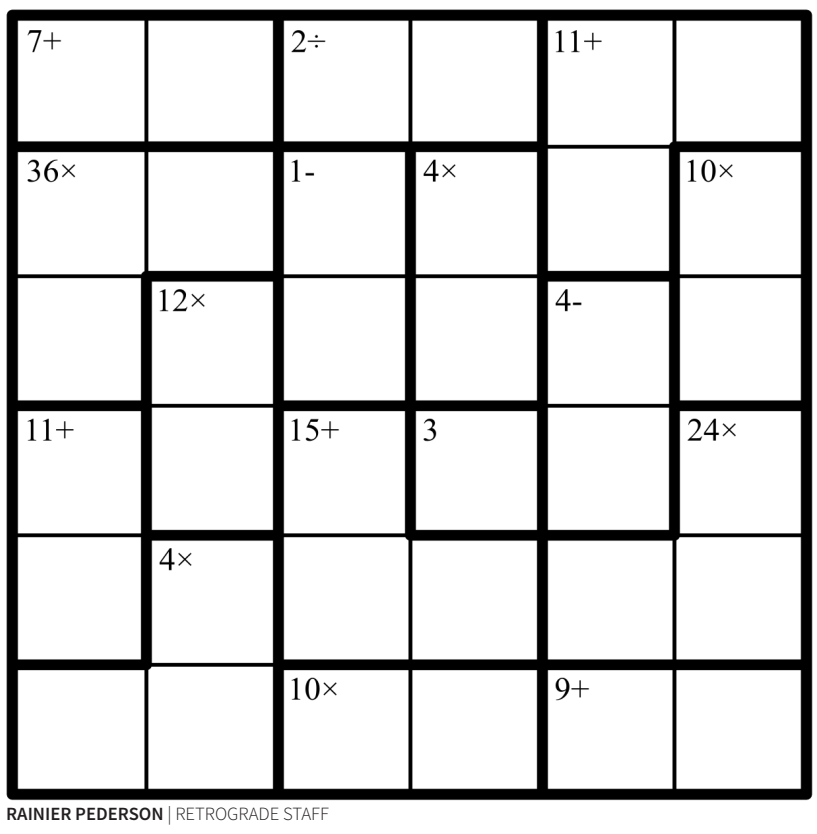
Puzzles

DIFFICULTY

★★★☆☆

KenKen

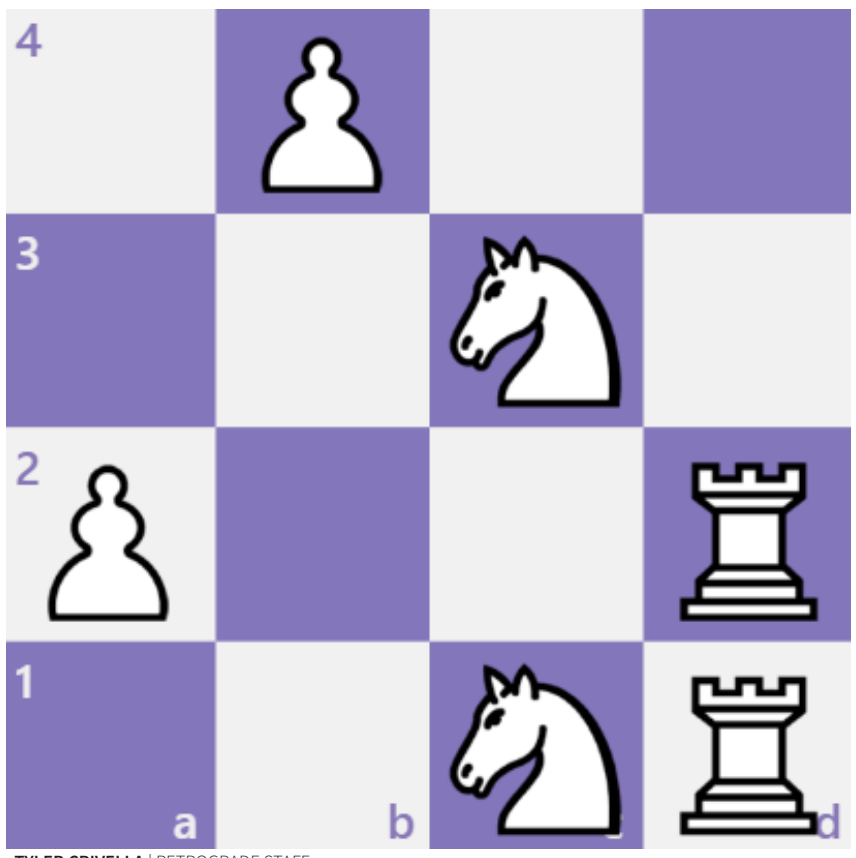
Instructions: Your goal is to fill up the 6×6 grid with numbers 1-6. Each column and row must have exactly one of each number. Each box (outlined with thick black lines) has a target number and a mathematical operation listed in the top-left corner. The numbers in each box must result in the target number when the corresponding mathematical operation is employed. For example, a box with 3+ could be satisfied with 1 and 2, as 1+2=3. Visit our website for a full walkthrough.



RAINIER PEDERSON | RETROGRADE STAFF

Solo Chess

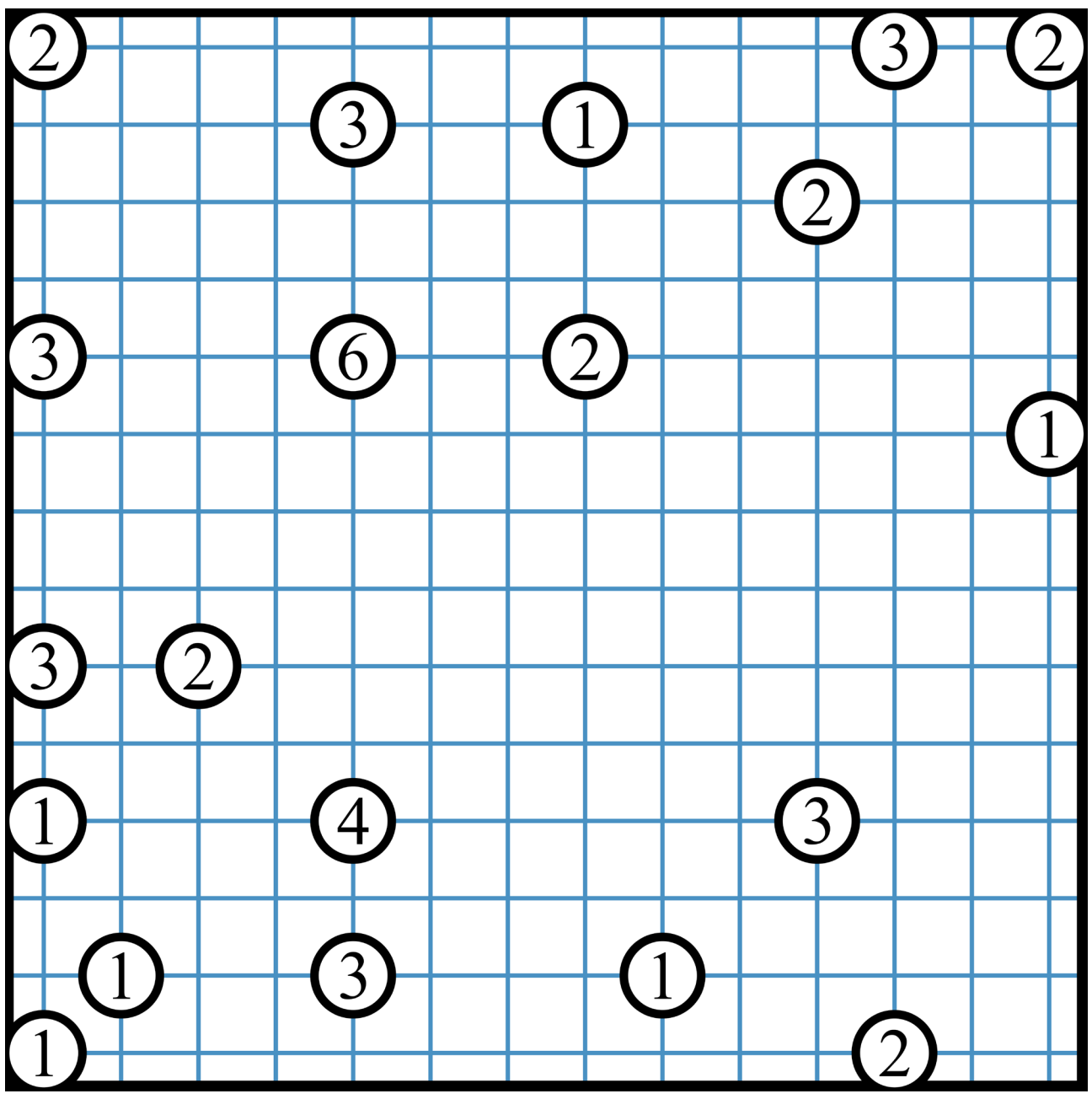
Instructions: Perform capture-only moves until one piece remains. Pieces may be moved repeatedly.



TYLER CRIVELLA | RETROGRADE STAFF

Hashi

Instructions: Connect all islands to one network by drawing only horizontal or vertical lines. Lines may not cross. The total number of lines attached to a given island is the number presented in its circle. Each island may only have two lines attached to it in any given direction.



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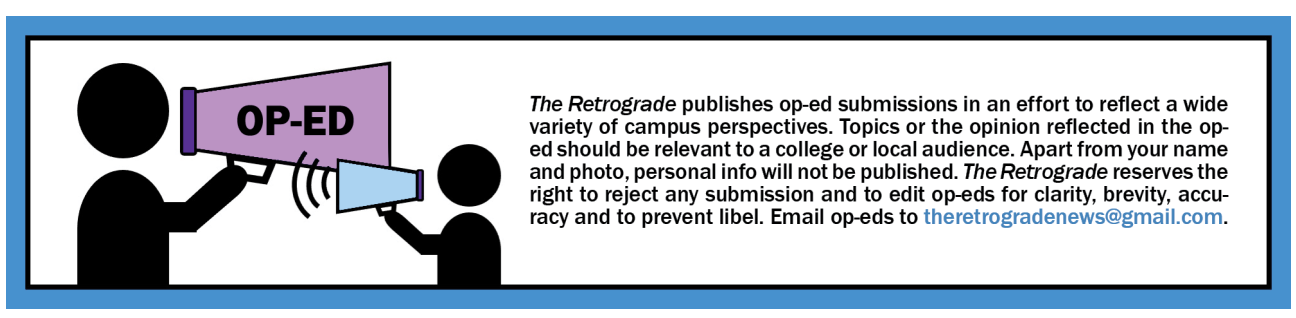

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A BEAUTIFUL, BEASTLY NIGHT AT THE THEATER

"Beauty and the Beast" on Broadway comes alive in Dallas with its unique musical numbers, ingenious stagecraft and heartwarming charm

NANDINI SINGH
Life & Arts Editor

With shows around the nation through late 2026, the Broadway production of Disney's "Beauty and the Beast" toured in Dallas from Dec. 16 through Jan. 4 at the Music Hall in Fair Park. Enchanting audiences across all ages, the musical presented a promise of nostalgia for the renowned fairytale to a packed venue — and delivered much more.

The show opens with the classic scene of a prince meeting a beggar woman who can only offer a rose in exchange for shelter in his castle. Because of his arrogance, he turns the woman away, only for her to transform into an enchantress that places a curse on him. Replicating the transformation from the beggar woman to the enchantress, while simple in animation or live action remakes, is a difficult task on stage. The show accomplished this deftly with strobing lights taking the audience by surprise and a gentle crescendo of music and fog filling the stage and captivating all.

The story then reveals the main protagonist Belle in the small village of Villeneuve, where she longs for more than what she's found in life. While the characterization of Belle and the people in the village is like film adaptations, the show finds a way to highlight each unique personality with the abrupt nature of their entry onto the stage. From the book salesman to the tavern keeper, everyone has a role, with their bright colors and voices that clash with each other as they sing — everyone in harmony yet without a sense of togetherness. It is this very togetherness and a sense of "more" that Belle seeks and is unable to find amid the chaos presented on stage.

Unlike other musicals such as "Les Misérables" or Disney's "The Lion King," both of which rely heavily on setting, the props are minimal in "Beauty and the Beast," with simple staircases and chandeliers in the Beast's palace and a small town square. While limited props can take away from a musical and its characterization, their use here brings out each actor's quirks and their interpretation of their roles. Gaston, an antagonist in the musical who is infatuated with himself and the idea of Belle, has larger than life movements on stage, with his arms and body moving wildly in dance numbers or his stance looking down upon others. During Gaston's song where he showcases his unique abilities such as knife throwing and skillful coordination at cup dancing, the actor brought to life the Gaston of the animated movie with his unique flair.

Being a character-heavy story, audiences are then introduced to Mrs. Potts, Cogsworth and Lumiere, a teapot, clock and candlestick, respectively. The costuming is similar to the shape and colors found in the animation, but also sports a humorous quality because of the cast controlling the characters' movements through small gestures such as pouring tea or holding candlesticks up, the audience found a slight respite from the setting of the foreboding castle. A scene with Lumiere lighting his candles and dancing from joy showcased a clunkier moment than what was presented in the movie, but it all the more connected with the audience.

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY GRACE COWGER | RETROGRADE STAFF

As Belle finds her way into the castle in a last-ditch effort to save her father who accidentally stumbled upon it, she clashes with the Beast's harsh personality. Finding solace in the inanimate objects who view her as their last hope, the well-known song from the movie "Be Our Guest" begins, and high-speed music and acrobatics fill the stage for a mesmerizing show. Dancers swivel their dresses to showcase the various colors in their costumes alongside lighting that introduces a carnival-esque theming. As the final notes roar through the crowd, a stream of confetti is thrown through the air to the audience.

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Wild Art: Truck Yard Toilet Seat Art Museum

KAT VAN NICE | RETROGRADE STAFF

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TYLER CRIVELLA | RETROGRADE STAFF

Spirit Rocks' spirit lives on through art exhibition

Students memorialize former campus icons with one-night display

TYLER CRIVELLA
Assistant Managing Editor

For one cold evening, Chess Plaza was alight — glowing with projections curated by a graduate class to recreate messages once spray painted on the Spirit Rocks.

Taught by professor xtine burrough, ATCM 6377, Creativity as Social Practice, invited its graduate students to engage with their community using an artistic display. On Dec. 2 from 5-8 p.m., the class exhibited "The Spirit of the Spirit Rocks," an installation consisting of messages that had been previously painted on the former Spirit Rocks.

burrough's classes often invite a unique degree of student participation, such as last semester's creation of a Temoc-centric alternate reality game in ATCM 4330. This graduate class was based partially on researching the field of social practice, an increasingly popular contemporary art form in which artists engage with communities directly, often to address local concerns. Its final exhibition is an embodiment of that research.

"We thought about so many of the things we miss [at UTD]," burrough said. "In the Student Union near the ping-pong tables, there used to be a big bubblegum machine that you used to get ping-pong balls from. I thought that was the coolest thing — it was so whimsical! These little things change, for whatever reason. [We] wanted to remember that."

At the heart of the installation lies the Spirit Rocks themselves. Described by the class as "the ever-changing canvas that once captured the creativity of UT Dallas students" in one advertisement, the Spirit Rocks were an open forum where individuals could paint any message "in good taste." As former UTD biology student Lyna Benhacine said in 2015, painting the Spirit Rocks was "a treasured tradition."

Their removal in November 2023 was met with almost immediate calls for their return from the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression and Student Government. A poll conducted in December 2023 showed 92% of over 1,500 respondents opposed the removal of the Spirit Rocks. Both current SG President Giana Abraham and Vice President David Baker have said they would bring back the Spirit Rocks "if given complete control of UTD."

"The Spirit Rocks had been a tradition since 2008," Master of Fine Arts graduate student Alan Yu said. "And suddenly it's just gone? That doesn't feel right. Similar to the Art Barn, which was taken down for the new Science Building, it just feels like students have less ways to express themselves on campus as we are moving more focused towards STEM."

One of the main goals of the installation was not just to provoke conversation about the Spirit Rocks but also to archive their existence, especially as incoming students are part of a new generation that never personally witnessed the Spirit Rocks. In collaboration with McDermott Library's Special Collections and Archives Division, students attempted to create a formal record of the Spirit Rocks to be housed.

"We realized that UTD doesn't have an archive of the Spirit Rocks and that was the 'Aha!' moment that made us pivot to this project," burrough said. "We wanted to construct something meaningful to understand how this thing happened and why it was important."

During the exhibition, observers were asked to share memories of the Spirit Rocks for documentation. Master of Fine Arts graduate students Lainey Tran and Alesandra Bell recorded conversations with community members, saving memories that may have otherwise graduated without record.

Read the rest of this story by visiting retrogradenews.com.

SECRETS OF A SQUIRREL WHISPERER

Over the years, student Michelle Beakley has made a small career and a home for campus' favorite fluffy-tailed critters

TYLER CRIVELLA
Assistant Managing Editor

TYLER CRIVELLA | RETROGRADE STAFF

Between the shuffle of unending classes, students will drag their feet around UTD's largely brutalist architecture. Yet, in the small grassy fields scattered around campus, a few small, furry friends stand in contrast to an otherwise concrete jungle.

UTD's squirrel population has attracted great attention from students and staff alike. For psychology senior Michelle Beakley, the squirrels have become something of a fascination. Beakley created @utdsquirrels_, an Instagram account committed to posting photos and videos of campus squirrels. Her connection to UTD's tree-hopping wildlife stretches back years.

"This all started around the spring semester of my freshman year," Beakley said. "I was eating lunch outside in a secluded spot and this squirrel was looking at my cashews so earnestly. It was begging for food, and so I was like, 'Here you go!' Then, it just became a routine for me. I just started posting about it on my Instagram because I got some cute pictures."

Modern appreciation of campus wildlife could not have come without decades of nature-based ecosystem planning. In 2006, UTD was infamously voted "Ugliest Campus in Texas," prompting a privately-funded beautification effort across the 2010s. Since then, the addition of 116 magnolia trees and ongoing conservation efforts turned UTD into a viable ecosystem for small critters. However, not everywhere on campus is welcoming to squirrels.

"The TI Plaza used to be a good place, but I feel like now that there's construction for the new Student Union … and they now have a lot less space," Beakley said. "So, they're more territorial. They're more likely to fight each other than to be like, 'Hey, where's my food?'"

For those aspiring to chase squirrels, Beakley has a few suggestions. First, one must find a "more comfortable" location, like the Student Union Mall or the Love Jack grass south of the Administration Building. Then, one must wait.

"My number one thing is patience," Beakley said. "When I first started, they didn't want to get too close to me. It took a long time for them to get comfortable. And some squirrels just never want to get too close, no matter how much time you spend with them. You have to remember not every squirrel is the same; we have introverts and extroverts among us people, and it's kind of the same with squirrels."

The rewards of such squirrel searches are bountiful. For Beakley, it is capturing photos of perfectly positioned squirrels, digitally building a community of likeminded followers and, particularly, gifting fun nicknames to identify repeat visitors.

"I like to name the squirrels, both female and male, after members of girl groups and boy bands," Beakley said. "I named [Dara] after Sandara Park from the K-pop girl group 2NE1. There was another squirrel I was close with; I named her Perrie after Perrie Edwards from Little Mix. It's an ongoing theme I have. I know it's cheesy, but I think it's cute."

Though construction may reshape the campus's concrete landscape, the squirrels will adapt, ensuring that pockets of furry, lively chaos remain for generations of students.

Wild Art: The Tianyu Lights Festival

FAREEHA CHOUDHURY | RETROGRADE STAFF

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The sweetest way to ring in the new year

Last week's bustling mochitsuki event welcomed 2026 with mochi-making, music, calligraphy and community right here on campus

RAINIER PEDERSON
Staff Writer

MARIA SHAIKH
Managing Editor

SHREYA RAVI | RETROGRADE STAFF

On New Year's Eve, campuses across the nation froth with college parties sporting fizzing drinks, ticking countdowns and balls dropping on television screens and town squares alike. But slightly over a week later, a different kind of celebration lit up UTD with music and laughter, trading the champagne for something a little sweeter.

Hundreds filled the Athenaeum Jan. 11 to celebrate mochitsuki, a Japanese tradition of making mochi for the new year. The event also featured drummers, calligraphy, multiple music acts and fresh mochi for visitors to sample as they learned more about Japanese culture and traditions. Kicking off the afternoon event was an energetic performance from daiko drumming group Dallas Kiyari Daiko.

While the event was sponsored by the DFW Japan-America Society, Dallas Japanese Association and UTD's Center for Asian Studies, both attendees and performers alike boasted diverse backgrounds. Daiko drummer Grace Chalker finds her performances a lifeline to the country she once called home.

"I lived [in Japan], I studied abroad there, I worked there, and when I came back, I wanted to have that connection with Japan," Chalker said. "I had a good friend of mine who got me into it and sort of inspired me to play the drums."

Meanwhile, Cody Gonzalez, an event volunteer, said he got involved to help share Japanese culture with the people of DFW and highlight the local Japanese-American community.

"I always loved Japanese culture since I was a kid, and I wanted to give something back to the Japanese-American community," Gonzalez said.

After the daiko session was the actual mochitsuki, or mochi making. Visitors crowded around to watch two performers take turns pounding the mochi dough with a wooden mallet, called a kine, in a large mortar, called an usu. While the mochi made was just for demonstration and was separate from the mochi being offered inside, the crowd was captivated by the speed and efficiency as they pounded the dough, pausing briefly only with a shout to rotate the dough in the usu.

Then came a myriad of musical acts, martial arts performances and calligraphy lessons where attendees got their hands dirty practicing their hiragana. Volunteers taught participants of all ages how to write the Japanese word for "dream" and the hiragana form of "mochi" to celebrate the event and bring in well wishes for the new year. Participants wrote with calligraphy brushes and got to take their work home with them as a souvenir.

All the while, the crowd lined up for and munched on mochi prepared before the event. Groups went on tours of the Athenaeum focused specifically on Japanese art history.

Read the rest of this story by visiting retrogradenews.com.

Dallas homelessness is about to get worse — so get involved

A new federal policy will gut long-term housing opportunities, increasing uncertainly for those who need stability most

YIYI DING | RETROGRADE STAFF

ROHITH RAMAN
Staff Writer

The Trump administration is preparing to finalize a major shift in federal homelessness policy whose damaging effects will ripple through Dallas. Internal planning documents indicate that permanent supportive housing programs, considered the backbone of federal homelessness intervention, will get their funding heavily reduced in 2026. Much of that money will be redirected toward transitional housing with work or service requirements, which rarely ever provide the stability needed for people to exit homelessness permanently, meaning Dallas' shelters will face higher strain than ever before. For Dallas and broader North Texas, a region already confronting rising homelessness and limited affordable housing, the effects of this decision will be grave.

For UTD students, this isn't just government policy — it will directly influence the city we live, work, commute and study in.

Permanent supportive housing has decades of evidence behind it. It pairs long-term housing with voluntary services, allowing people with chronic health conditions, disabilities or long periods of homelessness to get themselves stabilized before going through treatment or finding employment. The idea of transitional housing, on the other hand, is to offer short-term shelter under stricter rules, offering far less certainty about long-term issues such as addiction care programs and counseling. Taking funding away from supportive housing toward transitional programs does not eliminate homelessness, it simply attempts to shuffle people through short term solutions without a guarantee of stability.

Many local providers in Dallas County and Collin County rely on Continuum of Care grants, which the federal reshuffling will cut, to plan staffing, maintain units and support long-term housing contracts. If these grants suddenly cease to exist or expire without renewal, these programs will not shut down, but struggle to maintain capacity. Hundreds of students volunteer with or study alongside local homelessness organizations, including Austin Street Center, the Dallas Street Choir, The Bridge Homeless Recovery Center and OurCalling. These groups form the skeletal structure of the Dallas shelter system, and often step in when federal support falls short.

Students in the social sciences like myself study housing insecurity, volunteer in shelters or participate in think tank internships. A lot of other university students experience housing precarity themselves, going through rising rents, constantly changing leases and a lack of affordable student housing. A cut to supportive housing may not show immediate effects on campus, but it will influence the environment we all live, work and learn in. For example, during the 2022 winter freeze, The Bridge and OurCalling both opened emergency warming places and took in hundreds of people who couldn't be placed through city programs. Local reporting shows this happens every couple years, and this is a concrete example of how often shelters step in when official systems go wrong.

Right now, the federal approach treats homelessness as a temporary issue to manage, not a problem to solve. Redirecting funds away from permanent supportive housing sends a bad message that short-term aid is "good enough," rather than long-term stability. But because stable housing is the best model proven to help people exit homelessness for good, then the government's responsibility should be to invest a lot of money in it, not take a step back from it.

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Want students to succeed? Fuhgeddaboudit.

UTD's letter-of-the-law attitude punishes grad students facing personal challenges

ERIN GUTSCHKE | RETROGRADE STAFF

CM FOLTZ
Courtesy

In the 1997 mafia classic "Donnie Brasco," the phrase "fuhgeddaboudit" serves as a linguistic chameleon. Depending on the inflection, it can mean anything from "that's amazing" to "forget about it because it's over." As an undercover FBI agent, Joe Pistone learned that in the underworld, trust is a fleeting commodity. We like to believe the "real world" of academia is different — a meritocracy where administrative departments like the Office of Graduate Education under Dean Juan González advocate for the "intellectual and professional development" of every student.

University administrators are supposed to be more than just gatekeepers; they are the stewards of academic quality and the exemplars of ethical discernment. They are charged with upholding policies in a way that considers nuance over one-size-fits-all dogma. Yet, my recent experience suggests that for some students at the finish line, the administration's message is a cold, Brasco-style "fuhgeddaboudit."

My Ph.D. journey began in 2011, after completing a B.S. in computer science, a B.A. in English and an M.A. in literary studies. I am a student of literature and poetics who, like many of the university's students, funded years of coursework through student loans. By the end of 2016, I had completed every requirement except the dissertation, amassing $200,000 in debt. When I reached my federal loan and scholarship limit, I was forced into a hiatus to survive and support my family.

From 2017 to 2020, I stepped into the private sector, working at a sports management startup to make ends meet. By the end of 2020, I was poised to return and self-fund my defense, and I was briefly readmitted for the 2021 academic year, but then the COVID-19 pandemic hit and forced my company into bankruptcy and me into a four-year struggle for financial solvency; it was an untenable position, and I could not register and pay for dissertation hours. Throughout these "lost years," I remained an educator, teaching as an adjunct while working on my dissertation chapters.

When I finally secured full-time employment in fall 2025, I reached out to Dean Juan González. I wasn't asking for a handout; I was asking to return now that I finally had the financial stability the university requires. Initially, the system worked. Dean González met with me, heard the nuances of my financial hardship and that I needed an exception beyond the normal 10-year period, and he agreed to a one-semester extension only for spring 2026, provided that my committee members were agreeable based on the progress of my completed manuscript. My committee chair and department chair enthusiastically agreed to the timeline. I was at the finish line.

This is where the train went off the rails. At 5 p.m. on the Friday before the Monday admission deadline, Shilyh Warren, associate dean of graduate studies, emailed to state that in her opinion I "did not qualify for an exception." She further stated that none of my previous Ph.D. work would count toward any degree at the university. She suggested I start over as a new student, effectively erasing over a decade of work. There is a fundamental difference between a student who lingers for a decade without finishing coursework or exams — someone who might be seen as a "slacker" — and a student who has reached the finish line despite overwhelming external odds. Distinguishing between the two requires a case-by-case evaluation; it requires the "care and concern" that should define an academic community. Yet, the university treated a student who is one semester away from the end as if they were a slacker. Warren determined I was unworthy of an exception without any clear, communicated bases. Without a single conversation or a moment of outreach, she rendered a life-altering decision in a vacuum, ignoring the nuance that her role is designated and entrusted to protect. Shortly after her email, Dean González emailed me retracting his support, citing the need to avoid "establishing precedent."

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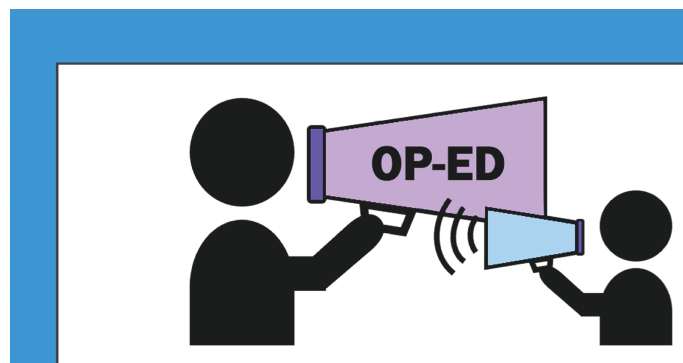

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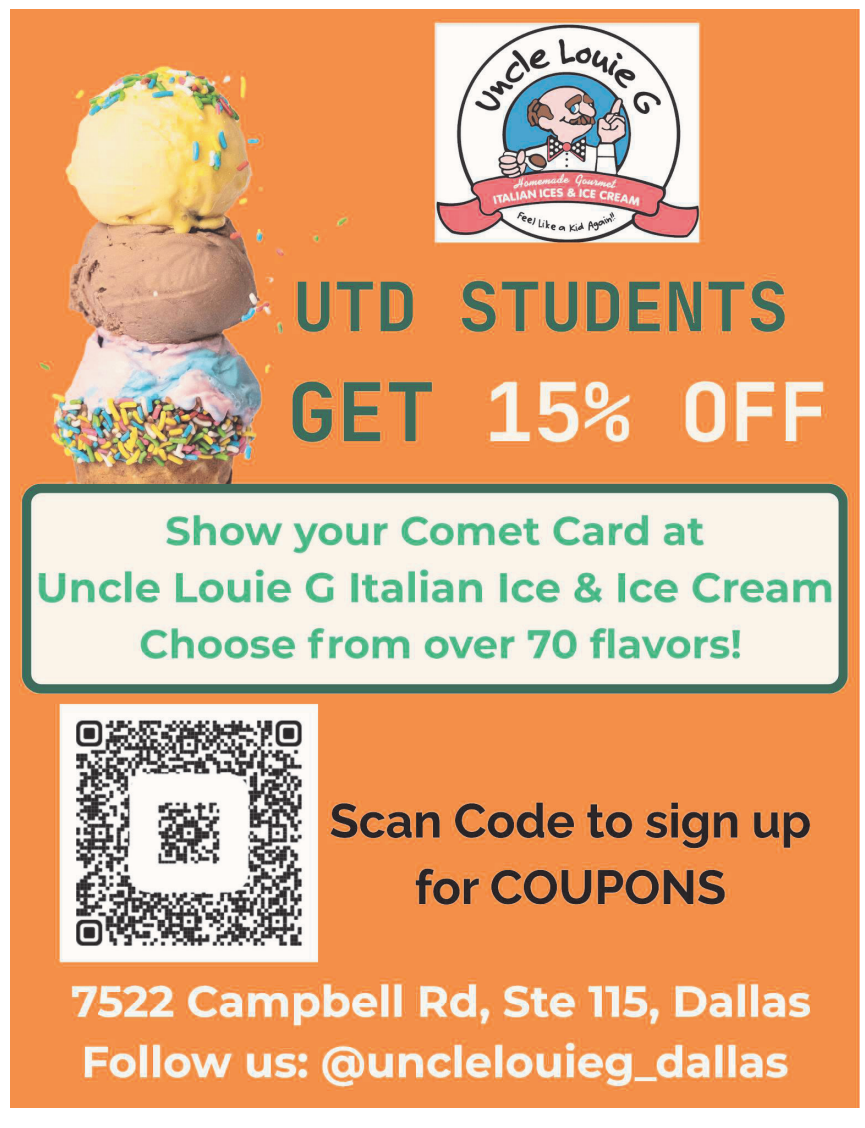

THE CASE FOR DALLAS CULTURE

Dallas lacks the personality of cities like Los Angeles — but we've got good foundations. And we can start building that culture today.

DEBORAH LUO | RETROGRADE STAFF

SAHASRA ELAPROLU
Staff Writer

This story was originally published online on Nov. 17.

After living in the DFW area for over seven years, I have recognized that Dallas is a largely corporate city. But I've come to appreciate the city's diverse restaurant scene, large shopping centers and active nightlife despite the metroplex's apparent rule by companies and stock tickers. The city is filled with variety in entertainment and recreation, but Dallas ultimately lacks culture because of the city's neglect of creative industries — and championing and expanding on what we have is how we as DFW residents change that.

When I think of major cities in Texas and across the U.S., certain aspects of each city's culture come to mind. It is easy to pinpoint that Austin is known for its lively arts and music scene, Chicago for its architecture, Houston for NASA and L.A. for its laid-back West Coast lifestyle. Above all, New York City thrives because of its deep-rooted culture standing on a fabulous foundation of art, fashion, food and popular landmarks.

Too often, Dallas' lack of city culture leads to residents getting excited about popular businesses from other cities coming to Dallas rather than promoting businesses in their own city. Recently, Prince Street Pizza and Brooklyn Dumpling Shop from New York City have opened new Dallas restaurants, leading to social media promotion and excitement from Dallas locals. I, too, have gotten excited about such businesses as I anticipate my first trip to newly opened L.A.-based clothing store Reformation and look forward to the opening of Palestinian restaurant Ayat from New York City.

These "foreign" restaurants and clothing stores shouldn't stop coming to Dallas; we just need to give DFW's amazing local businesses — some of my favorites being Sheesh Kitchen and Fair and Square Imports — their flowers by spreading the word, promoting them on social media and becoming regulars in order to create a culturally rich city.

Beyond that, Dallas needs to cultivate a unique city culture by hyping up its already diverse restaurants, expanding its arts and fashion scene and creating distinct cultural landmarks that will make the city more vibrant. It is easy to find at least one restaurant from most countries here in DFW because of the diversity of the metroplex and the prominence of small businesses as well as chains. I've heard of Fijian, Nicaraguan and Lao restaurants in Dallas, which are not often available in large numbers outside their respective countries. Even distinguished fine dining restaurants are available in no small numbers, as DFW is home to two Michelin-star restaurants including Tatsu Dallas, a Japanese sushi restaurant, and Mamani, an upscale French restaurant.

Despite the variety of dining options, it's hard to pinpoint what restaurants or even cuisines that Dallas is known for. While our food scene is diverse, it lacks direction. Our city doesn't have a specific cuisine that it's known for or any recognizable Dallas staples. Our culinary strength is in diversity, but not enough people know just how creative some restaurants are in reflecting this. In Dallas, we have a vast number of fusion restaurants which specialize in taking the significant cultural influences throughout the city and incorporating them into culinary art. From ice cream shop Scoop N' Buns fusing Filipino and Mexican inspired flavors and Halal Fusionz which combines Pakistani and Tex-Mex cuisine, famously reviewed in high numbers by popular TikTok food critic Keith Lee, one-of-a-kind food spots are unforgettable parts of eating out in Dallas. Centering our culinary landscape around fusion restaurants will both highlight the cultural diversity in the city and bring a unique charm which will attract many.

Along with restaurants, the arts scene has footing in Dallas and while it is growing, we need to bring this industry to the forefront. Dallas does have a large art museum — the free-to-enter Dallas Museum of Art — and other smaller galleries around downtown including Art on Main and Cris Worley Fine Arts. These independent galleries are common throughout the city and represent the indie arts scene, a niche cultural characteristic of Dallas. Along with physical artists, we also have musicians in Dallas such as Chadney Christle, whose voice is both mellow and spirited, and Vandell Andrew, a brilliant saxophonist whose jazz music is satisfying and smooth. All of these galleries and artists deserve recognition for their work in making Dallas a genuinely artsy place.

Fashion, too, has so much potential to grow in Dallas. Some designers like Munisa Khuramova, founder of fashion brand Munelle De Vie and Valerie Garmino have already planted the seeds of a fashion culture in Dallas by debuting and promoting their collections in the city.

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